

TOPICALIZATION AS A STYLISTIC PROCESS*

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One of the central problems that has continued to occupy linguists is describing the relationship between syntactic function and syntactic position. From the earliest formulation of the Standard Theory of transformational linguistics (cf. Chomsky 1965, esp. Chap. 2), an essential distinction has been recognized between the purely relational aspects of surface syntactic structures and more inherent, "deeper," syntactic functions such as those of category. Fillmore (1967), elaborating his arguments for a "deep" level of case structure, questioned the validity of such notional relations as "subject" and "object" and proposed that they be treated as the surface realizations of underlying case relationships (361). As a result of the work of other linguists, (Halliday 1967; Chafe 1970; 1976), the vague term subject is now often replaced by more precise terms such as topic, theme, logical subject, etc., as a means of distinguishing between the internal syntactic relationship that inheres between a given NP and its verb and the surface position occupied by that NP as a result of syntactic operations. The clarity of description gained by this expansion of linguistic terminology and the resulting enhancement of our understanding of different kinds of syntactic relationship can be seen when we consider pairs of sentences such as those in (1), where, for example, the child is both agent and topic in (a), while volunteer is the topic of (b), in which the agent has been deleted.

- (1) a. The child gave the money to the volunteer.
b. The volunteer was given the money.

Given the productivity of topicalization in English, and the fact that NPs can be topicalized regardless of their case "roles" in the sentence, it is clear that retention of a term such as subject as a means of designating a multiplicity of syntactic relationships

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could hardly serve any useful purpose in our descriptions.

In spite of the implicit recognition in the fore-going distinction that topic is a surface structure position, topicalization is still treated primarily as a "grammatical" phenomenon, and other linguistic relationships, such as AGENT, ACTION, GOAL, are categorized as "syntactic" or "semantic" aspects of the grammar, depending upon the persuasion of the linguist doing the analysis (Fillmore 1968; Sadock 1974; Schlesinger 1977). Failure to acknowledge the useful distinction between underlying, internal syntactic relationships between verbs and their associated NPs and the surface positions that the NPs may occupy as a result of various movement transformations has created a situation in which the process of topicalization is treated simultaneously as both a "syntactic" and a "semantic" process to be accounted for by the competence model of linguistic knowledge. While it is possible that a process such as topicalization may be all of these things at one and the same time, the resulting confusion in our linguistic descriptions and application of terms argues that some extension of the distinction between "deep" case relationships and surface syntactic position is required, along with an explicit recognition of the parallel to be drawn between the linguistic knowledge to be characterized by a competence model and that to be elaborated with a production (or performance) model. Bresnan (1978:1) has characterized the general problem of specifying "the relation between the grammar and the model of language use into which the grammar is to be incorporated" as "the grammatical realization problem."

In order to undertake the process of clearing up the terminological confusion and the overlapping descriptions of linguistic phenomena variously attributed to either the competence or performance model of native speaker knowledge, I am suggesting that topicalization be treated as an aspect of a production or realization model, a process that is neither "semantic" or "syntactic," even though NPs are topicalized by different syntactic operations. Under this analysis, topicalization is a stylistic process executed by a number of movement transformations; TOPIC is defined as a surface structure position into which any NP may be moved, a syntactic target slot filled by various rules conspiracies. In contrast, the agentive relationship, for example, that holds between a given NP and its verb is more properly to be dealt with as an aspect of competence, because that syntactic bond depends upon the semantic compatibility of the noun and verb in question; it is specifiable on the basis of the lexical features that structure the vocabulary, and it is not a relationship that regularly changes as a result of

movement transformations, (although it may). Topicalization of an NP, on the other hand, is only a surface syntactic relationship that results from movement transformations, and is dependent upon contextual considerations tied both to the speaker's rhetorical motivations and discourse coherence, not abstract grammatical principles.

Further support for defining topicalization as a stylistic process, and thereby explicitly recognizing it as a derivative syntactic relationship to be treated within a production model, is to be found in the opening discussion of Chafe (1976: 27), who suggests that a similar distinction needs to be made between what he calls "subject" status and "agent" status, although he does not develop the idea in any further detail in that article. Speaking generally of the "statuses" that a given noun may have, he distinguishes between "functional" roles, such as "subject" and "agent," which are involved in "the content of what is being said," and roles such as topic and focus, which have to do with "how the content is transmitted." Chafe's remarks indicate that making a distinction between the surface structure position occupied by an NP and its "deep case" relationship to its verb will enable us to discover how speakers make structural choices in packaging information. Positing that topicalization, which is one of the processes that affects the way in which information is transmitted from speaker to hearer, is a linguistic feature to be characterized by a production model provides us with yet another way of understanding the relationships between the case roles and interpretive functions of NPs. Proceeding from the assumption that we need to distinguish purely grammatical rules from their use in packaging information, an examination of examples of rhetorical uses of the passive rule because of its topicalizing function may help us to understand some of the complex relationships between rules conspiracies and how speakers use rules to package information. Specifically, I will concentrate here on the problems related to presenting information as "old" or "new," and raise questions regarding our use of these labels to characterize the interaction between speaker and hearer.

Satisfactory descriptions of the passive construction in English have not been forthcoming because we consistently confuse the syntactic structure itself with its stylistic effects in discourse. We have known for some time that the passive is one of the syntactic rules that topicalizes (Creider 1979, citing Maltheusius 1915) either the direct or indirect object in a sentence. But we also know that other transformations topicalize as well, for example, Left-Dislo-

cation, Dative Movement, about-Movement, Adverb Fronting, Particle Movement, Subject-Subject Raising, and tough-Movement, while various other transformations focus information, e. g., it-extra-position, there-insertion, and Quantifier Postposing (Creider 1979). Apparently, as Creider suggests, the syntactic rules exist because they provide speakers with ways of topicalizing and focussing information. But the stylistic uses to which any of these syntactic rules is put is dependent upon speaker assessments regarding contextual variables, and the grammatical rule itself must have an existence independent of its possible uses. Understood in this way, the passive transformation is only one of several transformations that has the effect of topicalizing an NP; topicalizing is not an aspect of the passive that needs to be included in its abstract description. The passive transformation moves NPs around in the sentence; topicalization is one result of those movements, and so is focus. Speaking more broadly of the relationship between competence and performance models, the syntactic rules, specifically the phrase structure rules, define the possible surface structure positions that the lexical categories can occupy, e.g., NP V NP, NP V ADV, etc. These surface positions, or slots, in sentences establish the syntactic target structures in languages. The transformational rules, on the other hand, in their ordered sequences, provide speakers with any number of rules conspiracies available to them for producing the target structures they judge to be appropriate to their subject matter, their own motivations, the information available to their audience, and the immediate discourse context. Put in purely structural terms, the target structure position determines both the function and, of a lexical item, sometimes, its category in a given syntactic sequence. The domain of stylistic inquiry, taking as its starting point the possible structures enumerated by the grammar, explores the communicative interface between the speaker and the hearer. This exploration must take into account three aspects of the discourse context and try to discover the ways in which they interact: (1) the speaker's intentions that motivate specific structural choices rather than others; (2) the ways in which those choices produce specific meanings but not others; (3) the interpretive strategies a hearer must use in comprehending both the information explicitly provided, and supplying what is only implied or not overtly manifest in the sentence itself.

What Chafe calls the "packaging of information" is a function of the surface position of NPs, the target slots in which they occur as a result of the transformational operations. It has been suggested (Halliday 1967; Chafe 1970; 1976) that the initial NP in a sentence, the TOPIC slot, occurs in that position in order to convey to

the hearer that it is "old" (or "given") information, while sentence-final position, the FOCUS slot), marks an NP as "new" information to which the hearer must attend. But, as Chafe himself acknowledges (1976: 29), the putative distinction between "old" and "new" information is not as clear-cut as some analyses seem to suggest, nor are we certain that TOPIC and FOCUS, as sentence positions, are firmly bound to these interpretive strategies alone.

One recent attempt to graft the old/new information hypothesis onto Grice's conversational postulates and its failure to recognize a variety of uses of language, as exemplified in the sentences that follow, will illustrate the loss in descriptive accuracy engendered by this rather lop-sided view of the speaker's role in structuring messages. Clark and Haviland (1977), starting with Grice's four maxims of the "Cooperative Principle" (1967), Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner, propose that what they call the "Given-New Contract" be included as part of the general principle of cooperation between speaker and hearer (4). As they characterized the conversational utility of the given-new contract: "the given-new contract is concerned with a syntactic distinction the speaker is obliged to make between given information and new information" (3). Although they state that adherence to the given-new contract is an obligatory requirement for the speaker, they also acknowledge that violations of the contract occur: "By adhering to the contract, the speaker can convey subtle pieces of information either directly or indirectly, and by violating the contract, [s/he] can deceive or mislead" (3).

Assuming, then, that the given-new contract places obligatory constraints on the ways in which a speaker can package information for the hearer, Clark and Haviland proceed to add four new requirements that the speaker must meet in fulfilling the given-new contract: (1) Maxim of Antecedence, (2) Appropriateness, (3) Uniqueness, (4) Computability (4-9). Of these obligations on the part of the speaker, only the maxim of antecedence may be violated, and only then in special circumstances. The other three are described as violations of the contract that are "not allowed" (10). Although they discuss what they call "covert violations" later in their article, and say that such violations "are meant to deceive" (34), the thrust of their analysis, drawing as it does on Grice's Principle of Cooperation, is to shore up the assumption that language speakers are somehow inherently "benevolent," a view which seems to select some measure of "maximum communication" as its standard and to ignore the more frequent occurrences of non-maximal communication. On the basis of observation (and participation), I would suggest that such maxims

for "ideal" conversations exist only in the minds of the people who made them up.

In fact, to the extent that we can say a given speaker is thinking of the audience, it appears that many speakers base their decisions about syntactic ordering on some projected idea of what their audience will "buy." Shifts of topic, between one sentence and another, in context, indicate that ordering is determined, not by what the speaker thinks the hearer knows or can be expected to know, but by what the speaker wants the reader to attend to, regardless of its relative information value. The sequences that follow illustrate the tremendous freedom speakers enjoy in their ordering decisions.

- (2) It appeared that the tigers were reacting to a drug they had been injected with. . . [pause]. . . that had been injected in them.

(Zookeeper, Omaha, 7/76)

- (3) Middle East harems are inherited. . . Not every potentate's son is glad of that. The youth bequeathed a houseful of heavyweights, did not always admire his father's choices. In bygone years, the harem women were fed oils. Fat was the fashion.

(Sioux City Journal, 7/8/79, A-13)

- (4) A two-hour special starts the giant saga of two soldiers--one compassionate, one ruthless. The women they loved, betrayed, and were betrayed by.

(Ad for "Once an Eagle," in TV Guide, 12/3/76, A-81)

In the first example, the zookeeper who made the statement had at least three ways of explaining what had happened to the tigers, and he tried two of them. There are three candidates for topicalization among the NPs in the sentence, they (referring to the tigers), a drug, and we or I (depending on the actual responsibility for administering the drug). In the first version of the sentence tried out by the zookeeper, they does appear as the topic of the relative clause, but after a thoughtful pause, the zookeeper decided to make the drug the topic and moved the pronoun referring to the dead

tigers to focus position. How does this shift in topic serve specific rhetorical strategies of the zookeeper? In order to answer this question fully, we must first consider the third option for topicalization, the one that the zookeeper rejected from the beginning, because the third choice made by the speaker isn't at all obvious from the surface structure of the utterance. If we return to the beginning of the sentence, we notice first that the topic of the matrix sentence is it, the dummy topic left behind by the extra-position transformation. Second, the predicate of the matrix sentence is appear, which requires an experiencer NP at some stage in its derivation. It is the deleted experiencer of the verb appear, which could have been either to us or to me, that could have become the overt agent in the third version of the utterance available to the speaker, e.g., It appeared to me/us that the tigers were reacting to a drug I/we had injected them with. Notice, however, had the experiencer surfaced in the matrix sentence, the speaker would have made overt the human agency responsible for the death of the tigers, and the truncated passive relative clause, with its agent deleted, would have been less successful because the experiencer of the matrix and the agent of the embedded clause are undoubtedly coreferential. We can now return to the question regarding the efficacy of the topic selected for the relative clause. The truncated passive construction, which remains stable in both of the speaker's versions of the sentence, suppresses the third candidate for topicalization, the agent/experiencer, thus leaving only two remaining candidates for topicalization, the inanimate instrument, the drug, or the dead tigers themselves. Given these two choices, it becomes clear why the zookeeper chose to topicalize the instrument rather than the dead tigers. Also of interest in this example though, is the pronoun that in the second version, which has been substituted for its antecedent, a drug, which apparently need not be rementioned in the revised version of the sentence. If a listener missed the overt reference to the drug that killed the tigers in the initial version of the sentence, s/he would learn little from the revision.

If we examine the contextual sequence in (3), in contrast, we find a different topic in every consecutive sentence, and it becomes obvious that the choice of topic has less to do with discourse cohesion than it does with the conceptual leaps the writer assumes the reader is willing to make, thus violating both Grice's maxim of quality and Clark and Haviland's maxim of appropriateness. The only way to "make sense" of this passage is to operate willingly within the belief structures the writer has imposed on the information. In fact, within the first three sentences, the writer opens a following sentence or clause by topicalizing the deleted

agent of a preceding sentence or clause, e.g., "...are inherited (BY ?). . .Not every potentate's son. . ."; "...bequeathed (BY ?) . . .his father's choices." We are not dealing with any "principles" of discourse continuity in this example; the reader is going to have to do all the work, with an excessive amount of credulity thrown in. The topic of the first sentence is "Middle East harems," while the topic of the last sentence is "fat." In order to trace the development of the discourse that makes this change in subject seem "inevitable," consider the underlined NPs and their relationships. First, the writer presents us with a truncated passive; the agent here, undoubtedly "potentate's son," has been deleted, although it will surface in the next two sentences as a possessive. The topicalized object of the passive, "Middle East harems," is not "old" or "given" information as far as the readers of the newspaper are concerned; it is, in its own way, the major subject of the discourse itself, reappearing as the direct object of a passive in the third sentence, "a houseful of heavyweights," as the object choices in the matrix of the third sentence, and, finally, as "the harem women," the topic of the fourth sentence, again by means of a passive construction, again with the agent deleted. It is important to note in this example that the agents have been deleted, not because they are unknown, or "irrelevant," or "old" information. The agents have been deleted because the writer wants the reader to internalize only the information that is made available. The transition from focus to topic in the last two sentences makes this strategic use of structure very clear. The direct object of the fourth sentence, oils, which is in "focus" position, provides the tie-in to fat, the topic of the last sentence, and the "idea" with which the reader is left at the end of the discourse. The discourse precedent for both oils and fat occurs in the embedded relative clause mentioned previously as "heavyweights." Of interest here is the condescending male tone that pervades the discourse for, of course, this passage is written as a "male interest" piece. Although we know that harems consist largely, if not entirely of wimmin, the fact that the writer is talking about wimmin doesn't surface until the next-to-the-last sentence. Although the subject of the discourse is specifically the heaviness of harem wimmin, male-specific nouns dominate in sentences two and three, and are the deleted agents of all three truncated passive constructions. This sentence is not bizarre or strange or atypical; it is standard, journalistic prose of the sort churned out for consumption by its male readers (and most of those who have access to the production end of the media assume that their audiences are male). This discourse was structured, not in accordance with some "hierarchy of accessibility" that requires an elaborate grammatical explanation, but to satisfy the writer's superiority and to

share his smugness with his male readers. In order to read this passage without wincing, one must, of course, already agree with the writer's point of view. As example (2) may have suggested, it is often easier to maneuver such shifts in topic during speech because hearers must process and interpret language much more quickly than they do written English, and they may, as a consequence, lose what was previously said when the discourse takes an unexpected turn. (3) indicates, however, that shifts in topic can still be managed unobtrusively as long as the audience agrees with the speaker.

Although the first two examples here are clearly shifts in topic motivated by rhetorical considerations, we find other examples, such as the one in (4), which we might regard as more "neutral" discourse, that indicate that we are dealing with more general conceptual frameworks and belief systems than with micro-elements in discourse. The shift in topic between the first sentence and the following fragment has less to do with whether the NP the women is so-called "old" information than it does with what the writer thinks will get an audience's attention. The opening sentence informs us that the program will be a saga about two soldiers, while in the noun fragment the topic is the women with whom the soldiers were involved. It is the passive construction in the third embedded relative clause, were betrayed by, that necessitates the topicalization of the NP the women in the fragment. The soldiers appear there as they, as the agent of two of the relative clauses, but as the object of the third one. What rhetorical purpose does the shift of topic serve? One could argue that the ordering of the relative clauses itself, which makes the object (the women) of two of the verbs (loved, betrayed) the topic implies that the women are the culpable agents of the final passive construction. It enables the writer to cast the women, who appear almost incidentally in the fragment, as the ultimate "betrayers," and de-emphasizes the behavior of the male soldiers.

As my analysis of the preceding examples indicates, our attempts to understand the ways in which speakers make stylistic decisions in packaging information will be limited, as well as distorted, if we try to apply "idealized" principles of cooperation to the actual uses of language we read and hear every day. One has to wonder who researchers like Clark and Haviland talk to. Do they talk to deans, chancellors, provosts, legislators, or reporters? Do they listen to politicians' speeches and press conferences? Do they read the papers and other popular media that "package" the news for us? Who do they talk to, and are they listening? These

questions are not merely rhetorical on my part. I ask them in order to emphasize what I see as the major weakness of attempts to formulate constraints on the possible forms that discourse may take: such conversational postulates stipulate, as a major thesis, an inherent democracy in exchanges between speaker and hearer, and they ignore, thereby, the inherent inequality of much of our daily exchange. That is, while we do, on occasion, participate in a conversation within our peer group, such situations are the exception rather than the rule. Most of us spend large portions of our time talking to people with whom we do not share some "balance of power." Because we speak either to those who have more power than we do or those who have less, it seems linguistically naïve to establish "rules" for conversation that ignore the power differential that exists among groups of speakers. We simply do not always speak to our peers, and it is only within discourse between peers that the effects of social power are negligible. Furthermore, even in those contexts in which social power can be ignored, we must still take into account the relative power of the speaker who structures the discourse, as my examples from the media indicate.

As the examples discussed here indicate, topicalization is a complex process that cannot be treated uniformly as a syntactic operation that simply permutes "old" information to sentence-initial position. The apparent ease with which virtually any NP can be topicalized seems to be more a function of the speaker's rhetorical motivations in presenting the information than it is the result of some desire on the speaker's part to package the information for "ease of interpretation" on the reader's part. That is, my analysis indicates that speakers use topicalization as a stylistic option that permits them to order (and re-order) the position of NPs so that the information will be processed and interpreted in ways that favor the speaker's belief system, not, necessarily, the hearer's. While we can say that one possible effect of topicalization is the presentation of a sentence-initial NP as "old" information, this is not, apparently, always the case, and it, too, seems to serve a speaker-motivated purpose. Thus, while subject does, indeed, seem to be a vacuous term when we consider the kinds of syntactic construction available to speakers/writers, topic does not appear to be closely tied to the presentation of "old" information as previous analyses have postulated. On the contrary, because various kinds of constituents can be fronted, depending on the rhetorical motivations of the speaker, topicalization is better understood as a stylistic process rather than as a syntactic process. As Chafe (1976) suggested, we need to make a distinction between the "deep

case role" in Fillmore's terms (1968) and the surface position occupied by a given NP. The one is a semantic function determined by the compatibility of an NP with its verb, while surface syntactic functions, such as topic and focus, appear to be determined by rhetorical considerations on the part of the speaker. As such, in order to distinguish autonomous syntactic rules from stylistic options, it may be more descriptively accurate to accept Steinberg's suggested distinction between grammatical rules and use rules (1975), thus clearly separating those structures that belong to a competence model from those that belong to a performance model.

If we accept Fillmore's arguments for underlying case structures, or some similar hypothesis, it becomes easier to formulate an underlying structure in terms of "full potential information" while the surface realization of the underlying structure is the result of various processes tied to the speaker's rhetorical strategies. Given this description, the case roles assigned to NPs are independent of their surface syntactic position and consequent interpretive function. Similarly, Bresnan (1978: 11-12), citing Lasnik (1976) and Reinhart (1976), points to the recent revision of transformational theory which has abandoned the idea that coreference relations must be handled by the rules of sentence grammar and posits, instead, that they properly belong to discourse analysis. Although most investigators would agree that topicalization is a speaker's choice, my analysis here suggests that it is a choice determined, not by consideration for the hearer's ability to process and interpret the information, but by specific rhetorical motivations on the part of the speaker that have little or nothing to do with the hearer's interpretive abilities, assumed or otherwise. If we wish to understand the stylistic function of topicalization, it appears that we will have to abandon the myth of the benevolent speaker and turn to a less generous hypothesis regarding the possible uses of language.

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